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Slaughterhouse-Five and the Myth of the Good War

Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is a semi-autobiographical eyewitness account of the Allied firebombing of Dresden, in which anywhere from 25,000 to 250,000 civilians were incinerated; however, it was not published until 1969, during the Vietnam War (Biddle). Though written about World War II, Vonnegut's novel engages crucial political issues about the justification for, and conduct of, a controversial war waged 24 years later. Throughout the Vietnam War, advocates for an increased US military role used comparisons between the situations in Southeast Asia and World War II (a trend that has continued to present-day wars). These comparisons were influenced by two factors: reusing combat strategies from World War II in the Vietnam War, and justifying those strategies based on their previous use to defeat an almost inarguably evil enemy: the Nazis.

However, these comparisons are flawed as they ignore the total history of World War II. By casting the Nazis as the icon of preternatural evil, the advocates of harsh Allied responses like the Dresden bombing ignore the brutality of those actions, whether in reprisal or in the mission of destroying enemy morale. Using Roland Barthes' analysis of myths in modern society, I argue that the history of World War II has been subverted into the myth of "The Good War." By examining the World War II events depicted in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, similar events during the Vietnam War, and the comparisons made between those events for government justifications during Vietnam, I will demonstrate how *Slaughterhouse-Five* invokes Vonnegut's

World War II experiences to attack the myth of “The Good War” and, thereby, deflate any comparisons that attempt to justify the tactics used during the Vietnam War.

The myth of World War II as “The Good War” has permeated literature, art, music, theater, film, and television since the earliest days of the war until today. The simplest explanation is that the Nazi brand of global fascism was the greatest threat to humanity and any means to destroy it were justified. Any casual reader of history can cite the Holocaust, the Battle of Britain, and the sheer multitude of war crimes committed by Germany and Japan against civilian and soldier alike during the war. However, this simple explanation is merely the root of the myth; it evolved during and since the war as the media began reporting Allied atrocities, such as the Dresden raid, the firebombing of Tokyo, and the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In a 2005 article for *The Humanist*, “How the United States Reversed Its Policy on Bombing Civilians,” Sherwood Ross describes the step-by-step approach that led from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s condemning the Luftwaffe bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War to Harry S. Truman’s approving the use of the atomic bomb on entire cities. The steps taken towards Hiroshima were made mostly by the British, but Ross lists no tacit disapproval by the United States. Because of the targeting of civilian population centers during the Battle of Britain, “popular feeling was growing that ‘similar treatment of the Germans is the only thing that they will understand.’” By 1941,

the [British] Air Staff issued a directive emphasizing that henceforward operations "should now be focused on the morale of the enemy civilian population and in particular of industrial workers." Lest this point not be

mistaken, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal wrote the following day: "I suppose it is clear that the new aiming points are to be the built-up [residential] areas, not, for instance, the dockyards or aircraft factories."
(Ross)

Once the directive was issued, British and American air campaigns no longer avoided civilian casualties. Tami Biddle reported in her 2005 article for *The Wilson Quarterly*, "Sifting Dresden's Ashes," that *The New York Times* regarded any civilian losses as the fault of Hitler's orders for a "hopeless resistance." However, when "an Associated Press war correspondent named Howard Cowan" reported that "the Allied air commanders have made the long-awaited decision to adopt deliberate terror bombing of German population centers as a ruthless expedient to hastening Hitler's doom," most Allied commanders—like "British Air Commodore C. M. Grierson of the Allied Supreme Headquarters Air Staff Section"—denied "terror bombing" tactics and said Dresden was targeted because it was a center "of communications through which traffic is moving across to the Russian Front, and from the Western Front to the East, and [was] sufficiently close to the Russian Front for the Russians to continue the successful prosecution of their battle" (Biddle). *The Washington Star* questioned the choice of Dresden after Cowan's remark, but excused the bombing as a "harsh but legitimate objective of war."

Ross and Biddle's research indicates that not only did United States politicians and generals have to overcome a previous aversion to bombing civilians to separate themselves from the Nazi war machine, but they later were forced to co-opt history once they added firebombing cities to their methods. According to Barthes, this falls directly into the concept of creating a myth, in that myths do not rewrite history, but instead are a partial interpretation of it with reassigned meaning (Barthes 128).

World War II quickly became a myth, in Barthes' sense of the term, based on a partial interpretation of history, and used for later reinterpretations during the Vietnam War. In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson pushed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution through the US Congress in three days, asserting that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked two U.S. destroyers. U.S. troops had already been present in the Southeast Asian country since 1954, when Dwight D. Eisenhower began dispatching "685 military advisors" to train South Vietnamese forces by the end of his presidency (Ely 879). John F. Kennedy dispatched further U.S. troops in 1961, raising the total to 16,000; however, the government assured the world that those troops were not combat units (Ely 879, "Vietnam War," *Funk and Wagnalls*). While Eisenhower and Kennedy had followed FDR's Lend-Lease Act example of aiding one side in a war while proclaiming neutrality, Johnson cited the alleged incident in the Gulf of Tonkin as a new Pearl Harbor, using the endangerment of American lives as justification for fighting communists in Vietnam. From that moment, advocates of the war would frequently cite World War II to justify massive carpet-bombing campaigns, chemical defoliation, and the My Lai massacre of 1968; to criticize anti-war protests as appeasing Ho Chih Minh as Neville Chamberlain had appeased Hitler; and to urge the American public to "stay the course" so that George Kennan's doctrine of containment would keep the new threat to all of humanity, Communism, from the United States (Ely 879-880).

Published in 1969 at the height of anti-war protests and troop deployment (486,000 "by the end of 1968"), *Slaughterhouse-Five* raises questions about the legitimacy of the tactics used in World War II against civilian populations and punctures the myth of "The Good War" (Ely 880). It shortly followed the 1968 revelation of the My Lai civilian massacre by U.S. troops, which was only the most "widely publicized" atrocity of many more reaching the American

press. Among others were the heavy civilian casualties caused by the use of napalm as a weapon and Agent Orange as a defoliant and the difficulty in distinguishing civilians from Vietcong guerillas (“Vietnam War,” *Funk and Wagnalls*). Ely cites 14 million tons of explosive dropped on Indochina alone and credits U.S. herbicides for “[poisoning] 10 percent of the cultivated land in South Vietnam and [destroying] 20 percent of its forests,” making the United States “allegedly [...] the first nation to use gas in combat since the 1930s” (Ely 880). The saturation of disturbing news from Vietnam in the media at the time Vonnegut was writing, therefore, suggests that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is engaging questions not only about World War II, but also the political issues concerning war crimes by the United States in a war many believed would never end.

In his 2004 article, “Dissent at the War Memorial,” Howard Zinn describes his own resentment towards “the way the so-called good war has been used to cast its glow over all the immoral wars we have fought in the past fifty years: in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Grenada, Panama, Iraq, Afghanistan.” The publication timing of *Slaughterhouse-Five* indicates a similar resentment. The narrator’s resentment is channeled into demythologizing the myth of “The Good War” by giving an eyewitness account of the physical and mental toll on civilian and soldier alike during World War II, which can then undermine the attempts by advocates and policymakers to compare it to the Vietnam War. As Eliot Rosewater warns in the novel, “I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren’t going to want to go on living” [emphasis his] (129).

The first myth *Slaughterhouse-Five* attacks is G.I. Joe: the American superhero. In his essay, “Mythicizing the Unspeakable,” Leslie Fielder credits *Slaughterhouse-Five* for inspiring anti-Vietnam movies by “deliberately subverting values of patriotism and combat heroism”: “the central image of evil is not the concentration camps of Hitler and the destruction of the Jews, but

the bombing by Americans of the open city of Dresden, suggesting that our own side (whichever it may be) is always and inevitably the real Enemy” (Fielder 391). Fielder’s analysis, however, does not account for the alternate title of the novel, “The Children’s Crusade.” The novel’s characters range from beanpole to fat, barely adolescent to advanced age, and thoroughly demoralized to sociopathic; in short, they are come from as many backgrounds as Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims and vary in degrees of nobility and wretchedness. Unlike the war movie that Billy Pilgrim watches backwards and forwards, not all of the soldiers started as “high school kids” who turned into “American fliers” (207). And even of those who are much older during the war, “[there] won’t be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne” because “we *had* been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood” [emphasis his] (18-19). The narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five* describes the novel’s characters as children or babies because they are all naïve to the realities of war. The separation between good and bad, though the narrator denies any such classification in the first chapter, is based on how they act once faced with war.

The main character, Billy Pilgrim, is the antithesis to “the greatest generation.” In an interview with Lee Roloff in 1998, Vonnegut describes the actual soldier Pilgrim was based on:

He should never have been a soldier. He didn't look like a soldier, in fact he looked like a filthy flamingo. Yes, he really did look this way. He was a sophomore engineering student at Hobart when he was drafted. He should have been put in limited service, or he should have been classified 4F, or whatever. He wound up, as everybody eventually wound up, in the infantry. All the army needed at that time were riflemen. And . . . he died in Dresden.

Billy's basis on a real, ungainly soldier demonstrates the attempt to demythologize what Zinn describes as the honored "military heroism [...] that conceals too much death and suffering" by casting him as the hero of the story. He does not charge any hills, or bayonet an entire machine gun nest. His sole combat experience is described as being told to "[get] out of the road, you dumb motherfucker"; and his unfamiliarity with that last word separates him from the film soldiers that created colorful acronyms like "FUBAR" and "SNAFU" (42). In a fit of irony, Billy does utter a war movie cliché afterwards: "You guys go on without me" (43). However, instead of meaning it as a heroic, lifesaving gesture, he really just wants to be left alone.

Irony piles further into Billy Pilgrim's character after the war. His overweight wife is proud that he was in the war, and the Tralfamdorians abduct him and place him in a breeding program with a porn star because they "[suppose] that he is a splendid specimen" (155, 144). The irony is that Billy is the complete opposite of the legend of American stud in France and back home after VE-Day, yet he is lumped in with all of the other combat veterans that *Slaughterhouse-Five* depicts.

Ultimately, Billy is neither redeemed nor—more importantly—condemned because he maintains his gentle aversion to killing before, during, and after the war. He does not become "tough" like individuals the narrator encounters after coming home from Europe—the very sentiment that leads to later wars in Korea and Vietnam.

If Billy is the anti-G.I. Joe, Roland Weary is its parody. Weary, much like his action figure counterpart, comes with every World War II accessory: "He had every piece of equipment he had ever been issued, every present he'd received from home," after which follows a list that is almost an entire page long (50). And while he is described as "the antitank gunner, [...] warning Germans away with a Colt .45 automatic in one hand and a trench knife in the other," he

is also “clumsy and dense” (41). Weary is proud to serve in the war. He is the self-proclaimed expert on killing Germans based on his knowledge of torture devices, weapons, and pornography. The latter characteristics are what condemn his character: he is vile and sad. Weary’s only friends are those who will have him, and once he shows or describes his expertise, he routinely abuses that person who would befriend him. He romanticizes the war, as evidenced by his application of *The Three Musketeers* to his own non-existent war record; this is the very same romanticism that caused him to kill his gun crew by opening fire on and missing a German Tiger tank (44-55). Because Weary takes delight in torture, abuse, and war for the sake of personal reward—like the fictional Musketeers who kill and maim the enemy for the King’s favor—he is condemned to die agonizingly from frostbite and gangrene as a prisoner of war. His death on the train to the P.O.W. camp demonstrates how the gung-ho attitude kills young men in World War II, which Vonnegut compares to every war by calling it “The Children’s Crusade.” In other words, Roland Weary is dead because he bought into the myth and tried to perpetuate it, just as the government attempted in Vietnam by portraying servicemen as the American superhero.

Paul Lazzaro, the “car thief from Cicero, Illinois,” does not buy into the myth of World War II as a great adventure, nor does he fit the stereotype of G.I. Joe (82). Instead, he is a sociopath who keeps track of everyone and everything who has wronged him and plans their gruesome demises, such as feeding a dog a steak filled with metal springs, arranging for a stranger to “shoot [the Blue Fairy Godmother’s] pecker off, and shooting Billy sometime after the war (175-182). He is another parody of the American war hero, only as one who will come home to wreck havoc like the biker gangs of the 1950s and 1960s. Lazzaro’s pledge to kill Billy

is satirical of how once people die, no matter how deranged or vile like Weary, they are instantly redeemed as heroes and memorialized.

These three characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five* demonstrate the absurdity behind the myth of “the greatest generation.” They are not supermen, and none is responsible for destroying Nazi fascism. They represent that percentage of miscreants found in any large group, particularly in a group as large as those deployed in Europe during World War II. When Billy refuses to tell Valencia about the war, it is not because of the horrible sights: it is because he will have to explain his and these men’s actions to someone expecting war stories.

The myth of G.I. Joe was touted long after World War II as policymakers compared World War II veterans to Vietnam servicemen. *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not forsake the comparison entirely; it just offers a larger, less generalized view of real men, and not mythologized heroes, in war. This view allows for genuine heroes, but also for more insidious soldiers capable of committing atrocities like My Lai. The novel connects World War II to Vietnam through Billy’s son, Robert. Robert is a Green Beret who joined the Army after a sordid history of flunking out of high school, alcoholism, and tipping over gravestones. Not only is he the connection between World War II and Vietnam for the novel, but he is also the example of someone actually “straightened out” and turned into “a leader of men” (242). However, the novel provides little to no details about him or his war record, just as most Green Beret missions were kept classified, save for the occasional assurance that they are doing a good job in the war.

One such example of the government’s lack of disclosure regarding Special Forces operations in the novel is when Billy hears a presentation by a major in the Marines, in which “[the] major told Billy that the Green Berets were doing a great job, and that he should be proud of his son” (77). Bearing in mind that this is the same major who also advocates “bombing

North Vietnam into the Stone Age,” the major’s idea of a “great job” becomes suspect with, unfortunately, no further elaboration. Billy’s response of “I certainly am,” is an anathema to the truth: he, like the American public, had little to no idea about what the Green Berets were doing, but were encouraged to respond positively because they were the model for Hasbro’s later line of G.I. Joes.

In their thesis, “War Crimes and Vietnam: The ‘Nuremberg Defense’ and the War Register,” D’Amato, Gould, and Woods detailed the 1967 court martial of Captain Howard B. Levy, otherwise known as “The Green Beret ‘Medic’ Case” (1055). “Captain Levy had refused an order to teach dermatology to Special Forces (Green Beret) medics in the United States who were preparing for service in Vietnam, on the ground that his teaching would be ‘prostituted’ by the Green Berets who in his opinion would commit war crimes once they arrived in Vietnam” (1055). The law officer admitted testimony in a “private session that Green Berets were engaging in criminal activity in Vietnam that violated international laws of warfare,” but the testimonies were not admitted into the actual court martial because there was no evidence of medics committing war crimes (1056). Taking the date of the court martial into account and the subsequent 1969 publication of the thesis, it is easy to deduce that the public believed that the Green Berets were committing war crimes, although little evidence existed on public record.

The novel’s all-too-quiet stance on Robert can be considered analogous to this opinion; however, if there are no villains in this story, then Robert can also be considered just a baby who was ironically played by John Wayne in *The Green Berets*. With the government’s lack of disclosure, *Slaughterhouse-Five* can only show Robert through a few glimpses by Billy, who only sees his son. In this way, the novel shows the reality beyond the myth of G.I. Joe: that each

soldier must carry his or her own burden after the war, and until that end, they must do what it takes to survive.

The next myth that *Slaughterhouse-Five* attacks is the all-encompassing threat to humanity: the Nazi. The Nazi is characterized in all forms of entertainment as an Aryan bloodthirsty giant—an image of preternatural evil which has made them the scapegoat for world history, the amorally disposable villain, and the timeless metaphor for later government-labeled evils. The narrator states in the first chapter that there are no villains because “that was one of those things I learned in college after the war” (10). True to the narrator’s promise, there are no completely bad guys, just nuanced characters on one side or another of a brutal war.

Slaughterhouse-Five does not imply that Hitler and his fanatics were not a threat, but that the civilians and young and old conscripts were not the same as the Nazi war machine.

At the very first encounter with German soldiers, the novel portrays them in the same light as it did when addressing the myth of G.I. Joe: individuals gathered solely to fill ranks for total war and not cut out of a national mold. Billy and Roland are captured by a dog named “Princess,” “two [...] boys in their early teens,” “two [...] ramshackle old men—droolers as toothless as carp,” and “a middle-aged corporal” who is “about to find someone to surrender to.”

They were irregulars, armed and clothed fragmentarily with junk taken from real soldiers who were newly dead. So it goes. They were farmers from just across the German border, not far away. (67)

What is most striking about the corporal is that he punishes Weary for his cruel knife—a triangular blade with spiked knuckles—by giving his boots to one of the German boys in clogs.

The corporal is judging Weary in the same fashion as the two infantry scouts who abandon him. All three have fought presumably longer in the war and are interested solely in survival, even if it means surrender, which the corporal is already prepared to do. After finding no weapons on Billy, he essentially leaves him alone, except of course for taking him prisoner (69-70). Because the corporal is ready to surrender himself, he is providing the same opportunity for Billy. In this instance, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has made the Germans simultaneously pitiable and capable of justice. These German soldiers are in the same position as Billy and Roland Weary, though on the other side of the rifle barrel and defy the image of the blonde-haired, blue-eyed SS storm trooper that bayonets Jewish babies for sport.

The myth of the preternaturally evil enemy was echoed years later during the Cold War—only policymakers replaced “Nazis” with “Reds” or “Commies.” Fueled by Kennan’s theory of containment, Vietnam became a focal point for Cold War rhetoric as the Russians and the United States both contributed to the war efforts of North and South Vietnam respectively (Lovett 81-82). During the Vietnam War, apologists for civilian deaths stated that it was difficult to identify a guerilla Vietcong fighter; therefore, it was safer for U.S. troops to assume civilians were Charlie. The only thing worse than a Vietnamese communist in the eyes of a patriot was a Russian, as the Soviet Union was responsible for unleashing the evils of communism on the world. Russians became the new scapegoat for war, accused of corrupting smaller nations like Vietnam in order to spread their evil world order, communism. *Slaughterhouse-Five* punctures the adapted myth of the preternaturally evil Russian with similar tactics that it used for Nazi soldiers.

The novel presents an unnamed Russian soldier identifying with and saving Billy from injury when he gets inextricably snagged on a barbed wire fence while attempting to urinate at

night. The scene was a rarity for literature published in 1969: a Russian capable of pity and helping out an American:

A Russian, himself out in the night to take a leak, saw Billy dancing—
from the other side of the fence. He came over to the curious scarecrow,
tried to talk with it gently, asked it what country it was from. The
scarecrow paid no attention, went on dancing. So the Russian undid the
snags one by one, and the scarecrow danced off into the night again
without a word of thanks. [...] The Russian waved to him, and called
after him in Russian, “Good-bye.” (157-158)

Beyond showing a Russian in a shared, though vulgar, moment with Billy, this scene is also an allegory for the United States’ treatment of the Russians as allies, historically and in entertainment. Vonnegut asserted in his interview with Roloff that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was well-received in the Soviet Union “because it was the only popular American novel that admitted that Russians or Soviet citizens were also in the war. Every other American war novel had had the United States and the British winning it single-handedly.” The Russians apparently agreed, so much so that they turned the novel into a musical and staged it in the Red Army Theater. Vonnegut was quick to comment that he believed that “it is the only pacifistic show that was ever put on there” (Roloff). The allegory also places both men in the same position: urinating on a barbed wire fence between them, which conjures imagery of the Berlin Wall long after World War II. *Slaughterhouse-Five* demonstrates that the Russians share a similar worldview, though have different goals. The novel does not pit capitalist and communist ideologies against each

other, but rather shows the similarities between individuals from opposite sides of the iron curtain.

In an interesting twist on the myth of the preternaturally evil enemy, the novel forces Billy and the rest of the prisoners of war to choose between mortal enemies: the Nazis or the Russians. Billy and his fellow prisoners are asked by Howard W. Campbell, Jr., “an American who became a Nazi,” to join “The Free American Corps” and fight on the Eastern Front against the Russians. Campbell justifies the defection, explaining to the American P.O.W.s that they would “have to fight the Communists sooner or later.” While presenting his case, the narrator describes him as a caricature of American movie heroes: cowboys and superheroes—the very same entertainers “fighting” the war back home like John Wayne and Captain America:

He wore a white ten-gallon hat and black cowboy boots decorated in swastikas and stars. He was sheathed in a blue body stocking which had yellow stripes running from his armpits to his ankles. His shoulder patch was a silhouette of Abraham Lincoln’s profile on a field of green. He had a broad armband which was red, with a blue swastika in a circle of white.

(206-208)

Old Derby’s speech in response, entreating the POWs not to trust Campbell, smacks of the myths of the Good War. He speaks “movingly of the American form of government, with freedom and justice and opportunities for fair play for all,” and he also speaks of “the brotherhood between the American and Russian people, and how these two nations were going to crush the disease of Nazism, which wanted to infect the world” (209). Old Derby’s age is important, especially when delivering his speech to his fellow POWs. The imagery is analogous to politicians in the United

States who would quickly change stances on the Russians once fascism was defeated in 1945. The novel incorporates irony into his speech as he uses the same words that U.S. policymakers used during World War II for the Nazis, and later used to describe Soviet communism shortly after World War II, reaching a boiling point by 1969 in the Vietnam War.

The final myth of World War II that *Slaughterhouse-Five* attacks is enabled by the previously dissected myths: civilian bombing as a tool for destroying enemy morale. If the American superhero is trying to halt the ruthless and all-encompassing evil that is Nazi Germany, then civilians are viable targets. With the myths of G.I. Joe and the preternaturally evil Nazi (or later Russian) deflated by focusing on characters who parody or behave contrary to their assigned roles, the full significance, as Barthes asserts, “[undoes] the signification of the myth,” which leads *Slaughterhouse-Five* to its conclusion: the destruction of Dresden and the myths that permitted it (Barthes 128).

It is no coincidence that Billy Pilgrim is an optometrist, and an ambivalent one at that. In fact, he accepts the job as merely the cards that life dealt him, which means fate placed him in both his vocation and at Dresden. It is his job to correct our vision of Dresden by showing us all of the ghastly details of the firebombing’s toll. The worst imagery is that of the ineffective shelters in which thousands of civilians were cooked alive: “There were hundreds of corpse mines operating by and by. They didn’t smell bad at first, were wax museums. But then the bodies rotted and liquefied, and the stink was like roses and mustard gas” (273-274). Because men begin dying from “dry heaves after having been ordered to go down in that stink and work” in these impromptu mausoleums, “bodies weren’t brought up anymore,” but were instead “cremated by [German] soldiers with flamethrowers” (274). The narrator hints that the search for bodies ended early so the Germans could fight the approaching Russians: “the corpse mines

were shut down” (274). This helps explain why a thorough body count was never finalized: because of the rapid change of governments in eastern Germany at the end of the war, it would be impossible to maintain a consistent tally. This scene also uses the irony of German and American soldiers cleaning up corpses together to further demythologize the generalization that all Germans in World War II were evil.

Slaughterhouse-Five also addresses the apologists for the bombing through the character of Harvard history professor and retired brigadier general (Air Force Reserve) Bertram Copeland Rumfoord. As an official historian of the United States Air Force, Rumfoord cannot finish his condensed version of a “twenty-seven-volume *Official History of the Army Air Force in World War II*” without information about Dresden (235). Lily, his much younger assistant, does not understand why the Air Force would keep information about Dresden top secret, thereby making her an allegory for the younger generation learning about World War II from policymakers and advocates. Rumfoord replies, “For fear that a lot of bleeding hearts [...] might not think it was such a wonderful idea” (245). He “orders” her to read “Truman’s announcement to the world that an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima,” in which he explains that Japan started the war and that the Nazis would have used atomic weapons if given the chance (237). He then has her read forwards to David Irving’s controversial (and real) book, *The Destruction of Dresden*. The forwards are by Ira C. Eaker, a retired U.S. Air Force general, and Sir Robert Saundby, a British Air Marshall. Eaker also justifies the raid on Dresden based on V-1 and V-2 rocket attacks on England and “the loss of more than 5,000,000 Allied lives in the necessary effort to completely defeat and utterly destroy Nazism” (239). Like Truman, he mentions that he remembers “who started the last war” (239). Saundby apologizes for the raid as “a military necessity few, after reading this book, will believe. It was one of those terrible things that

sometimes happen in wartime, brought about by an unfortunate combination of circumstances” (240).

Saundby’s rationale is refuted by Biddle’s article, in which she cites communiqués between Allied commanders which list Dresden as a target that would "cause great confusion" and "hamper movement of reinforcements." Biddle states that these terms are euphemisms for using “the large number of refugees on the eastern front to create a "human wall" that would impede the Wehrmacht and drain away food, fuel, and medical attention from the German war effort,” aiding the Russian push from the east. Because of the uncounted number of refugees from the east, she believes there is no way to really know how many civilians were killed at Dresden (Biddle).

The scene between Rumfoord, Lily, and Billy is an allegory for the debate regarding the bombing of civilians in Germany, Japan, and Vietnam. While Rumfoord is condensing an entire history of bombing into a single volume of piecemeal information, he wants Lily to read only the justifications for Dresden, not the entirety of David Irving’s actual book. Whenever Billy speaks up about being at Dresden, Rumfoord dismisses his comments as rambling or parroting, much as those arguments presented by protestors during the Vietnam War were dismissed by the generals and the government. Billy is interrupting the official government education of young Lily, or in a larger sense, interrupting the policymakers attempting to justify the use of similar tactics in Vietnam. Like Barthes’ mythmaker, Rumfoord is providing just enough history to reassign the meaning of “135,000” dead as a “military necessity” to annihilate the evil people “who started the war.”

Slaughterhouse-Five uses the real forwards to Irving’s book and Truman’s speech, which demonstrate the effort that the government has put into preserving the myth of “The Good War,”

even throughout the Vietnam War. The attacks by Rumfoord, Eaker, and Saundby on David Irving's book were later echoed in an essay by Melden E. Smith, Jr., "The Strategic Bombing Debate: The Second World War and Vietnam." Smith classified *The Destruction of Dresden* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* as "the literature throughout the 1950's, 1960's, and up to the present on the subject of bombing campaigns of the second world war," which largely obscures the "treatment of the latter, more decisive phase of the bombing offensive against Germany" by using "vivid and horrifying detail" (Smith 182-183). Smith denounces books like *Slaughterhouse-Five* because they are later "invoked time and time again during the high-pitched, often emotional debate over bombing at the height of the Vietnamese War" (183). The novel addressed Smith's point long before he could defend carpet-bombing campaigns, which dropped a total tonnage of "14 million—seven times the amount we used in all of World War II" (Ely 880). By denouncing the novel, Smith merely illustrates another attempt to redefine the myth that bombing civilians is ever justifiable, whether they are Nazis or communists.

Slaughterhouse-Five directly addresses carpet-bombing in the Vietnam War when Billy listens to the address by the Marine major--a scene which connects the World War II generation (Billy) to Vietnam (the major). The major advocates "that the Americans had no choice but to keep fighting in Vietnam until they achieved victory or until the Communists realized that they could not force their way of life on weak countries," and then follows it up with the same thoughts that led to Dresden: "He was in favor of increased bombings, of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason" (76). Yet Billy "was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam," until he is reminded that his son, Robert, will witness the same horrors during his tour with the Green Berets. And based on the history of the Green Berets in Vietnam, Robert could well be committing similar atrocities to Dresden and My Lai.

Billy goes home to nap on doctor's orders so as not to weep because "among the things [he] could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (76-78).

It is the novel's final line that destroys the myth of Dresden: "Poo-tee-wheet?" (275). In his essay, "Salvation, storytelling, and pilgrimage in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," Alex Vernon finds it "hard to imagine a more nihilistic note in war fiction than the novel's final 'word,' the bird call that, like divine judgment, hangs in the air after the firebombing of Dresden, the question itself (much less the non-existent answer) beyond human articulation: 'Poo-tee-wheet?' (215)." As the last line in the book, it is the final word on Dresden. When this bird call is compared to the rhetoric used by Dresden apologists and Vietnam War proponents, it resonates as, as Barthes applies the term, the "ambiguous signification": the reader responds "to the constituting mechanism of myth, to [the myth's] own dynamics," and becomes "a reader of myths" (Barthes 128). The bird signifies the end of all myths and presents the reality: a city was wiped out, civilians that cannot be numbered were slaughtered, and wars that use the same tactics continue ceaselessly.

Slaughterhouse-Five's attack against the myths of World War II with wry—and often vulgar—wit makes its message palatable for young adults like Lily who were being led astray by the government in 1969. By satirizing the myths through irony and allegory, the novel presents a side of history not told because the government wishes to promote similar techniques used in later wars, especially in Vietnam. By applying Barthes' principle of interpreting myths, the narrator, Billy Pilgrim, and the birds are the observers that "[focus] on a full signifier, in which [they] clearly distinguish the meaning and the form, and consequently the distortion which the one imposes on the other" (Barthes 128) This "demystifies" the myth through deciphering and understanding the "distortion" at play (Barthes, 128). *Slaughterhouse-Five* undercuts any

possible justification for civilian-based bombing campaigns and massacres in Vietnam, revealing them as the attempt to employ the myths of “The Good War”: a distorted history of the tragedies of World War II.

In memory of
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
1922 – 2007

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